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Exotic Felines in French Legend

INTRODUCTION

Here, I propose to analyze the legends about the intrusion of exotic felines into rural France. I have been studying this type of story since 1982. Furthermore, J.-L. Brodu and I undertook a field study on the Beast of Noth, in the Creuse region. The results were published in 1984 (Meurger 1984). In October 1983, we conducted a new study in the Morvan region, on a local belief about pumas in the woods (Morvan 1983). I had previously conducted a series of interviews with another team in the Cézallier region, on the Beasts that were reported in this mountainous region during the post-war period (Cézallier 1983). In August 1984, in ambervillers, I met with witnesses to the significant social uproar caused by the Beast of the Vosges in 1977-1978 (Vosges 1984). Finally, in the company of wildlife journalist J.-J. Barloy, I was able to interview those involved in the 1986 panther hunt in Le Touquet (Touquet 1986). The aim of this article is to compare the results obtained during these investigations with legendary sources in order to identify the themes and function of this narrative cycle. [1].

1. CONTEMPORARY NARRATIVES

The stories studied are structured around observations of animals considered non-native and presumed to be exotic felines. Independently of—or concurrently with—these observations, attacks on domestic animals occur. Certain characteristics of the attacks appear unusual, prompting rural residents to consider the action of an exceptional predator. New observations may occur, confirming the anomalous hypothesis. The hunters' efforts remain in vain in most cases. The attacks cease, interest fades, and everything returns to normal until the next incident.

The regional crisis.

For the contemporary period, two major periods of reports on "exotic felines" can be identified:

- from 1946 to 1956, the cycle of the Beast of Cézallier;

- from the late 1960s, a constellation of cases: Beast of the Vosges (1977-1978), Panther of Pornic (1982), Beast of the Esterel (1983), Panther of Le Touquet (1986), Beast of Malataverne, in the Drôme (1988).

At least two of these cases, those of the Beasts of Cézallier and of the Vosges, deeply moved "public opinion" in one or even several departments (in the case of the Beast of Cézallier).
The social disquiet caused by the authorities' inability to halt the cattle slaughter led to a profound crisis of confidence that can be compared to that discussed by Anne Vourc'h regarding the reintroduction of the lynx in the Vosges. This authorspeaks of a phenomenon of "regional crisis" (Vourc'h 1988).

1946-1951.

In the immediate post-war period, the meat shortage was severely felt and caused various disturbances in the departments of the Massif Central. In some cases, farmers violently opposed the authorities at the markets, who wanted to seize their unsold animals in order to feed the population.
The appearance of several predators was then reported, taking a heavy toll on the livestock. In a climate conducive to the creation of food fantasies, the various animals were first hypostatized—on the model of Gévaudan—into a single Beast, a lioness. Under the skin of the Lioness of Cézallier, the real culprits - canines - continued their depredations until 1951, when the most famous of them, the Wolf of Gran-drieu (Haute-Loire), was finally killed.
But the 1983 investigation showed that opinions are now divided as to the true culprit. While some remember a "wolf attacking the sheep," an octogenarian shepherd, who had seen the Beast prowling in the moonlight around his buron, persists in calling it a lioness. To support this interpretation, he emphasizes the attack technique. The animal jumped on the backs of his cows like a feline. He noted deep longitudinal scratches on the skin of his animals. Recalling one night of the attack, the cowherd concluded:

> "The cows were crazy... if it had been a dog, they would have defended themselves and he wouldn't have attacked them like that" (Cézallier 1983).

The exotic feline theory was established by the patient accumulation of a series of anomalous signs. These clues made it possible to justify the use of the extraordinary solution (Meurger 1984).

1977-1988.

The second major period of reports on exotic felines opened with the controversies surrounding the reintroduction of the lynx. The first release took place in 1983, in the Vosges, but the regional Alsatian press had already raised awareness of the issue as early as 1976 (Vourc'h 1988). This publicity gave rise to a series of beliefs in clandestine reintroductions of lynx in many parts of French territory. Thus, in Noth, in 1982, an informant confided to us, very confidently:

> "They introduced the lynx near the Millevaches plateau to prevent the spread of

epidemics by roe deer."

These supposed clandestine releases of lynx may also have encouraged attempts to explain certain cases by resorting to hypothetical felines. During the Beast of the Vosges affair, while eyewitnesses unanimously described the animal as a canine (Vosges 1984), several theorists, whose speculations were published in the press, spoke of "lynx," "puma,"[2] or even "lion" [3]. The lynx model undoubtedly gained in appeal thanks to the emotion aroused by the killing of two of the felines released in the Vosges in October-November 1987.
The following year, reports of lynx sightings multiplied. One was reported near Compiègne, while in December In 1988, its Afro-Asiatic relative, the caracal, was localized in the Ain region by certain rumors [4].

The big cat cases of this period all present major definition problems. The perceived and the analyzed do not correspond, generating an area of interpretative uncertainty highly conducive to the development of legendary constructions. Thus, in the case of the 'Beast of the Esterel', in February 1983, the first witness described the animal as a "big cat." Its owner suspected it could be a "puma." However, the analysis of the footprints conducted by the director of the Esterel Zoo did not reinforce this hypothesis. The Beast could just as easily have been some large dog [5].

In the Drôme region, in December 1988, the Beast of Malataverne was described as being similar to a "tiger." But experts who examined the casts of tracks leaned more toward a "puma." These two felines do not resemble each other, and local interpretations remained uncertain: for some, the Beast was a "lynx," for others a "puma" or even a "wolf" [6].

These choices stem less from strict conjecture than from a recourse to the popular bestiary. The "wolf" appears in the case of the Beast of Malataverne, just as the "lion" appears in the case of the Vosges. These designations—while they resolve nothing factually—reintegrate the episode into a traditional framework.

The construction of the object. Véronique Campion-Vincent recently proposed classifying stories of exotic felines among "contemporary legends" under the heading of "rural legends." She also considers them a "new phenomenon in France," linked to reintroductions (Campion-Vincent 1989). Although rural and contemporary legends, stories of felines are not "new." The publicity given to reintroductions has only reactivated well-rooted beliefs, but these beliefs are limited to subterranean circulation, in the absence of occasional phenomena facilitating their resurgence. A cattle massacre, when the usual interpretations seem inadequate, can provide this opportunity. This incident also offers the press the opportunity to mention the belief in exotic felines. Indeed, for information to be disseminated, it must present the characteristics of an event.

The spotlight therefore preferentially focuses on a topography. The press will note

routes: that of the supposed feline, strewn with carcasses; that of the hunts. As soon as this topography ceases to be animated, media interest will fade. But the event does not take into account the antecedents or the after-effects. Current events cannot shed light on the long psychological preparation or highlight the existence of a local tradition of which the feline's chase is merely an expression. The extensive episode of the Surrey Puma, in southern England, began in 1962. It did not achieve journalistic notoriety until 1964 and has persisted locally to the present day (Goss 1986 2). The belief in exotic felines roaming free exists independently of its mention in the press. In 1983, J.-L. Brodu and I were able to study in the Morvan region a whole narrative cycle unified by the belief in a family of pumas taking refuge in the deep forests.

As in Noth, the Morvan residents interviewed had patiently accumulated clues to anomalous presences. They constituted the various pieces of a speculative puzzle.

One informant mentioned the gnawed boar's leg discovered by a gamekeeper. Another alluded to the deer hides abandoned on a tree. All these interlocking elements led to the silhouettes of the mysterious Rocky Mountain Pumas. According to a local source, this corpus had been circulating for at least ten years (Morvan 1983). As early as 1955, the popular weekly Radar, under the headline "A puma terrorizes Burgundy," devoted its flamboyant cover to the hunting of a feline. A lumberjack from Dijon reportedly saw this puma having just grabbed a fox in its mouth.

A fortuitous incident can reactivate these local beliefs, endowing them with interpretive value. Once the unusual nature of the predations is considered established, rural residents will turn to local, regional, and national specialists (veterinarians, naturalists, exotic game hunters). Since agreement generally fails to be reached among these different experts, this situation, far from inhibiting imaginations, will, on the contrary, multiply possible identities. Potential witnesses will consider this or that hypothesis depending on the degree of attractiveness and the greater or lesser respectability of the authority formulating it. The incorporation of various composite portraits of the predator through individual experience will produce on the ground the completely improbable situation of a proliferation of carnivorous animals: felines, canines, and even bears [7].

The Valais Monster.

The Valais Monster case is instructive in this regard. In April-May 1946, several sheep were devoured in mountain pastures. A human culprit was first suspected, then a dog. As the carnage continued, the French-speaking press launched into a series of speculations regarding the identity of the predator: a wild dog, a wolf, a lynx, a bear, or an animal escaped from a zoo. One journalist even spoke of a "monster," a term that deliberately classified the predator as being outside the norm, prompting readers to seek extraordinary solutions. Given the predator's hunting method, the naturalist Abbot of Sion, Ignace Mariétan, hypothesized that it could have been a lynx. His hypothesis,

repeated by the radio and the press, "found a lot of support" (Mariétan 1946). Several witnesses then came forward, whose extremely precise observations supported the clergyman's speculation. Among them, a forest ranger, an individual supposedly possessing a good, pragmatic knowledge of nature, described an animal with a short tail and a round head. A teenager even mentioned the lynx's characteristic ornament: "pointed ears with a brush of fur at the end." Two shepherds spotted at dusk a gray beast with a "large, round head like a cat's."

(Mariétan 1946). However, as we shall see, the predator was nothing like a lynx, which did not prevent several witnesses from identifying it as such, under pressure from Father Mariétan's "authoritative" interpretation. A process that helps put the current case of the Lynxes of Ain into perspective.

The former director of Basel Zoo, R. Hediger, in his analysis of the "Monster of Valais," emphasizes the "suggestive effect" of the lynx hypothesis, which conditioned the witnesses, shaping their observations to match their convictions (Hediger 1952).

At the next stage, we witness an illusory multiplication of presences, a phenomenon of ubiquity already mentioned in the case of the Beast of Gévaudan and in Noth (Meurger 1984). In Valais, two beasts were reportedly seen at the same time, in different places.

Abbé Mariétan informed the press that there were therefore two lynxes to hunt. Public opinion is either passionate about the determination of these animals or about finding ways to rid the country of them (Mariétan 1946).

As in the past in Gévaudan, eccentric inventors offered their services. Many Valaisans also called the police to share their revelations about the identity of the "monster." For one woman, for example, the culprit was a "fabulous green snake" she had seen in a dream. This drift toward the irrational was a consequence of the authorities' inability to stop the scourge.

While those responsible for the ordinary had failed, specialists in the extraordinary appeared, ready to take over. In desperation, the officials called on a tamer, Fernando. Barely dispatched to the scene of operations, the tamer, accompanied by two gendarmes, unearthed a "fairly small animal." The description was vague, but Fernando claimed that the mountain beast had "nascent spots," which allowed him to identify it as a "young panther." He managed to convince the police of the existence of an entire family of predators: the father, the mother, and their three cubs. The big cats had apparently escaped from an Italian zoo during bombing raids. From then on, all the surveillance agencies' activities were guided by this idea (remarks Father Mariétan). Fernando set a panther trap sprayed with a liquid designed to attract the felines. The trap remained empty, but, stimulated by this safari atmosphere, former colonials entered the debate. After the circus, Tartarin. An African hunter claimed that "the" predators of the Valais were pumas. Another bushman, who had captured fifty panthers, retorted sharply that

Fernando had correctly identified this feline. Panthers were not afraid of the cold and could therefore acclimatize to Switzerland. In Noth, the influence of the "former colonial" was decisive in imposing the "lioness" theory. The first witness, who believed he had seen a mane, reversed this opinion under pressure from this diagnosis issued by an "authority" (Meurger 1984). In Valais, in 1946, other authorities reinforced the feline theory. The Institute of Zoology at the University of Lausanne, having received casts of footprints, confirmed that it was indeed a feline. Professor Mathey even specified that it was likely a "lynx from Savoy" (Mariétan 1946). Covered by the zoological authorities, the witnesses followed suggestions from above. One group saw an animal "with pointy ears," another textbook lynx.

For the Valaisans, who would not have had access to natural science books, newspapers complacently reproduced plates depicting lynxes, offering even the most ignorant accurate models. At this stage—where authoritative opinions are both widespread and divergent—we are witnessing a conflict of interpretations. A resident of Agarn claims to have encountered a pair of felines with their three cubs, Fernando's panther family. A former circus employee, no doubt impressed by the African hunter, claims to have observed a puma at length. Since no interpretation has become the majority, all find themselves as models for rival observations. The original uniqueness of the Valais Monster has shattered. From an isolated individual, we have moved to a couple, a family, and then an entire menagerie roaming free. According to witnesses, the Valais herds are at the mercy of a lynx, five panthers, and a puma. A fleeting menagerie, always seen, never captured. At the end of a hunt, a hunter kills an animal "after having observed it for a long time through binoculars." He identifies it as a "puma." The body is found. It was a cat (Mariétan 1946).

Technological tools themselves cannot provide objective data when the person using them is subject to the power of belief. In Pornic, in 1982, the black beast that prowled around campsites was declared a "panther" by a witness who had observed it through binoculars. The killed animal turned out to be a feral cat [8].

The proximity of the object also does not offer absolute guarantees. In the final stages of the Valais Monster affair, a young man had plenty of time to study an animal that was three meters away from him. His description "perfectly matches the lynx," according to Mariétan. At the beginning of 1947, experts from the Bern Natural History Museum also weighed in. They compared the Valais Monster's prints with those of a lion and, according to them, the prints of the terror of the mountain pastures "looked devilishly like those of the king of beasts" (Hediger 1952). However, the lion did not have time to become a model for testimony. On November 27, 1947, in Eischoll, a poacher who was on the lookout for foxes shot a large wolf, which was exhibited at the Sion museum. The carnage then ceased, as did the sightings. The Valais Monster had lived.
The saga of the mountain beast reveals the weight of expert interpretations on the testimonies. All were wrong—the serious official institutions, the naturalists, and the

hunters—and all provided the witnesses with interpretive material that allowed them to construct illusory animals.

If the wolf, the real culprit, had not been killed entirely by chance, if it had, for example, left the Valais, the belief in the exotic feline would have persisted. The end of the carnage could have been explained by the death of the puma in some inaccessible ravine. In the absence of the decisive piece of evidence, the remains of the Eischoll wolf, the fiction of the exotic feline could have become the subject of a tradition. The stuffed wolf allows us to assess the degree of factuality contained in the case of the Monster of Valais. It also helps us recognize the pervasiveness of the exotic feline model. The Beast of Cézallier. Just like the Monster of Valais sequence, the Beast of Cézallier affair is due to the same objective factor: the final offensive of the wolves, long sheltered in the mountain fortresses and fir forests they had reoccupied. From the high plains between the Cantal and Monts Dore massifs, the wild beasts spread across a vast territory, sowing terror among the herds. The panic spread to four departments: Cantal, Puy-de-Dôme, Haute-Loire, and Lozère, home of the Beast of Gévaudan. The Beast's original uniqueness was shattered by the effect of spatiotemporal expansion. In addition, other figures from the popular bestiary came to rival the initial "lioness": the "bears" of the canton of Saugues, one of the strongholds of the Beast of Gévaudan, and the "panther" of Haute-Loire. Against the latter, in June 1947, the prefect of this department—as, today, the prefect of the Vosges—took the lead in the hunts. In March 1948, in Margeride, hunters described the Beast as a "lynx." In June 1949, a "hyena" was reported in Haute-Loire. Unlike in Valais, the death of one of the true predators, the wolf of Grandrieu, in February 1951, did not completely interrupt these relationships, as other wolves still prowled, providing support for the legendary identifications. That same month of

February, a motorcyclist from the Saint-Flour region, in Cantal, claimed to have been chased by a pair of "cheetahs." In the same department, still during the winter of 1952, hunters tracked an elusive plantigrade (Cézallier 1983). As in the case of the Monster of Valais, press speculation and experts certainly suggested certain identifications. But oral tradition must also be taken into account, and more particularly the imagery of the Beast of Gévaudan, also defined as "hyena," "bear," "wolf," "panther," and "lioness." These interpretations, widely disseminated at the time through print and engraving, gave prominence to certain figures of the popular bestiary.

The "hyena" and the "bear" reappeared as designations of enigmatic "beasts" in the Central provinces in the 19th century, suggesting the existence of a tradition of the Beast of Gévaudan, shaping later episodes. The bear, unusually, long since disappeared from the natural bestiary of the Auvergne mountains, remained in the legendary bestiary, sometimes associated with the lion as castle guardian and "feudal beast" (Meurger, 1984).

Human hypotheses.

In a recent interview, Anne Vourc'h remarked regarding the question of reintroductions:

> "Behind the sheep, there is the farmer. Behind the lynx, there is the ecologist." [9].

The social nature of the debate could not be better emphasized. In the legend of exotic felines, here too, man is never far away. Sometimes as an alternative interpretation of the carnage, sometimes as the Beast's secret leader.

At Cézallier, several informants told us that the "lioness" was merely a convenient mask for conspirators.

> "The Beast was the maquis... to eat, they had a cow skinned by a dog and then ate it... they had the cows attacked to make people believe in the Beast... a plane would land on the Cézallier plateau and take off with the cows..."

Another informant even specified: "at Rochefort-Montagne,they would steal the animals by plane" (Cézallier 1983).

This tendentious legend pushes the Beast episode back to the time of the Second World War, glorifying the "recoveries" of the maquisards. During our investigation in the Morvan, we also discovered that one of the supposed "puma" hideouts was the site of the region's former resistance headquarters. Here we witness the fusion of two legends: that of exotic felines and that of the Resistance, particularly rich in the Central provinces. These are combined with traditions concerning the black market and livestock trafficking. We have already mentioned the meat shortage that served as a backdrop to the events at Cézallier. It also prevailed in Switzerland during the Monster of Valais affair, and some Basel residents interpreted the carnage as a ruse by the Valaisans, a ruse allowing them to carry out clandestine slaughter with impunity (Hediger 1952).

The intrusion of technology into the legendary is also a characteristic of contemporary legends. We can compare the aviation of the Cézallier cow thieves with the viper helicopters of environmentalists (Campion-Vincent 1988) or the submarines of alcohol smugglers in Quebec (Meurger 1988 6).

Human intervention can also take the form of sending a ferocious beast. Some Vosges residents, still moved by the carnage of the Beast, bred it into several mastiffs, the "German's dogs" (Vosges 1984). Similarly, in Valais, in 1947, people also spoke of "German military dogs" (Mariétan 1948).

The wolfdog of the concentration camp guards is a serious rival of the wolf and the feline in the contemporary popular bestiary. The sender of the beast is also sometimes conceived as a beneficiary of technology. Here, the automobile replaces the airplane. In the Vosges, I was shown the discreet forest paths that the mysterious car supposedly followed, taking the Beast behind the meadows where it was released to commit its

crimes. In Le Touquet, an informant mentioned the "van with bars" where the "black panther" was supposedly seen before the events. For Scotland, Michael Goss collected a report on an enigmatic "yellow van" plying isolated roads around the time of the appearance of the Beast of the Skerray (Goss 1986, 4). These various automobiles serve the same purpose as the viper helicopter. In both cases, technology, a sign of civilization, is subjugated to an enterprise of rewilding or malicious predation. But today's beast-sender is grafted onto an ancient and traditional model, that of the wolf-leader of rural folklore (Meurger 1984). It is time to study these precedents.

II. ROOTS IN HISTORY

Historical works record certain events that undoubtedly contributed to the formation of traditions. Certain ancient, popularized literary works may have contributed to the formation of models.

Felines and their doubles through 16th-century chronicles.

For the Centre region, where the lion plays a significant role in the popular bestiary, this anecdote can be extracted from the chronicle of Robert Gaguin (1425-1502), La Mer des histoires (1536 edition).

> "A domestic lion in Auvergne, having escaped from its master's house, devoured several men and women until the master, followed by a large number of peasants, presented himself to the lion, who, recognizing it, came to surrender. But, shortly afterward, he was shot so many times that he was killed on the spot." [10]

This episode, given its scale and dramatic nature, may have given rise to a local tradition.

If we return to Burgundy, it is to see that exotic felines have long roots there. The author of the handwritten chronicle of the convent of Saint-Vivant-de-Vergy, in the Dijon region, included this marginal note:

> "In the year 1545, Dom Odin Lescrivain, a monk of Saint-Vivant, killed in the Bois de Chevigny, at a place called Trois-Vies, a wild and strange beast, very cruel, called a leopard, which killed and devoured several people, both men and women, and others, who were roaming the countryside and guarding their livestock in the fields, and others who were greatly distressed and disfigured. This gave the elected officials of the country the right to publish everywhere that anyone who killed the said beast would be rewarded, so much so that the said Odin, who killed the said beast with an arquebus, was rewarded with six crowns. And it was found to be a male wolf, otherwise known as a werewolf, which in Latin is Veneficus anthropophagus" (Jacquemont-du-Donjon, 1900).

The presence of a wolf fond of human flesh in Burgundy at this time is not surprising. A year earlier, Charles V, in invading France, had passed through a neighboring province, Champagne, and the king's subjects had practiced scorched earth tactics. However, as the Grand Huntsman John of Clamorgan would later note:

> "War also attracts large numbers of wolves to a country. For wolves follow a camp for the carnage they find of dead men, horses, and other livestock killed, and killed. And those who have become accustomed to eating human flesh, with great difficulty, want to eat other flesh (Clamorgan, 1576).

The identification of a particularly aggressive cannibalistic wolf with a werewolf was traditional (Meurger 1989). However, originally, the Fauve de Vergy was perceived as an exotic feline.

A similar identification would be repeated a few years later, in regions near Burgundy. It is mentioned in the work of the Angoumois Franciscan friar André Thévet, the Cosmographie du Levant (1556). Two years earlier, Thévet was at Court and, the conversation turning to lynxes, the Franciscan friar informs us that some are said to be "very cruel and furious." He continues:

> Of this species, one was seen in France not so long ago, which, emerging from the forest of Orléans, in the Berry region, in the year 1548, devoured several people. He was killed by a gentleman bailiff of the King's Chamber, named Sébastien de Rabutin, lord of Savigny. However, the said wolf was not (as the said lord told me, when I was at Fontainebleau, in the year 1554) similar to our common wolves, but had leopard-like fur (Thévet 1556).

The compiler Jean de Marconville reproduced this story in his collection of prodigies, amplifying it considerably:

> In Berry, Auxerrois, and the region of Orléans, in the aforementioned year 1547, two large, very cruel beasts were seen, causing inestimable harm to the aforementioned regions by slaughtering countless men, children, and other animals they encountered, so much so that no one dared leave the houses unarmed and without going in troops.
> Finally, the townspeople assembled in arms and performed such a great duty that they were killed after the incredible damage they had caused. It seemed that it was a divine punishmentsent to those quarters, as Thévet recounts, however, it is said that the Emperor of the Turks, Suleiman, out of great singularity, had sent to the King of France, Francis the First of that name, a number of leopards, ounces, and other beasts, not only wild, but also cruel, and that one or two escaped from

those who brought them to the king, in the forest of Orléans, which caused the aforementioned damage (Marconville 1564).

In just a few years, oral tradition had inflated the episode to the dimensions of a veritable Great Fear. The initial beast also split into two.
We went from Thévet's "lynx with fur reminiscent of a leopard" to Marconville's pair of leopards or lynxes. This shift toward exoticism was facilitated by the uncertainties of Renaissance zoology. Hélène Nais notes that, in the 16th century, three names were available for *le lynx: loup-cervier*, *lynx et once*. The latter term was in common use (Nais 1961).

However, naturalists, following their master Pliny the Elder, considered the lynx sometimes as a subspecies of wolf with a speckled coat, sometimes as a type of leopard. At the popular level, it was therefore very easy to identify the beast shot by M. de Rabutin as a leopard.

However, the leopards' relationship with Francis I could well be biased. This monarch had, in fact, formed an alliance with Sultan Suleiman I the Magnificent to resist the House of Austria. The Grand Turk and the Barbary Pirates offered many exotic felines to Francis I and his successors. But the choice of the escaped feline was not accidental. In medieval symbolism, the leopard was considered a hybrid, the fruit of the illegitimate union of a lion and a panther, hence its name leo-pardus, lion-panther. It was considered an evil and cruel creature—the latter trait illustrated by the martyrdom of Saint Marciana of Caesarea, spared by the noble lion but torn to pieces by the leopard. [12]
Marconville himself emphasizes the "cruelty" of escaped leopards. This characteristic made them particularly suited to symbolizing the ferocity attributed to the Ottomans, "Turkic cruelty," as Marconville says in another passage of his work. By his alliance with the Crescent, did not the King of France deliver the country to the ravages of felines that the Turks, according to hostile propaganda, delighted in unleashing against Christians? [13]
The legend of the leopards of the Grand Turk would thus be an "exemplary story" (Campion-Vincent 1976), as well as one of the first testimonies to the theme of the "dangers of exoticism." Over time, the Lord of Rabutin's exploit took on epic proportions, and the Palace of Fontainebleau preserves a pictorial reminder of it: a corner painting in the Henri H gallery, showing a gentleman grappling with a curious wolf with a striped coat. According to lynx historian Louis Lavauden, the painting was not painted during Rabutin's lifetime, since the nobleman depicted is wearing the costume of the hunters of the following reign, that of Henri II. According to Father Dan, who published an Inventory of the Marvels of the Royal House of Fontainebleau in 1643, the painting depicts a gentleman condemned to death who obtained pardon for his

crimes thanks to his victory over a ferocious "lynx" (Lavauden 1930).

Nearly a century after the events, the episode was folklorized. The name of M. de Rabutin was forgotten, being replaced by one of those condemned to death from the legends who slay wild beasts and dragons. The leopard reappeared in several stories from the late 16th century, thus becoming part of the French popular bestiary. A parish register in the Chartres region, for example, records in 1581 the attack on a child by a "wild beast" that left him for dead: "It is the opinion that it is a leopard or ounce." Here again, the designation of the predator as "ounce" does not ensure its identification. On the contrary, it refers to a polysemy whose legendary interpretation captures the powerful term. The oscillation from the ounce to the leopard allows for the fantastical presence of the exotic feline.

It also demonstrates the richness of the lynx imagination.

The Memoirs of Claude Hatton, priest of Mériot (1553-1582), are an invaluable source on the Provins region during the time of the Wars of Religion. The passage of armies attracted wolves.

With them, the entire imaginary of the cannibalistic Beast is reactivated.Hatton reports the appearance of a "ferocious and wild beast, uncommonly seen in the country," which held the fields day and night, devouring passersby. The priest adds this clarification:

> "it was not as big as an old wolf, but very cruel...It was neither bear, wolf, nor lion. Some thought and said that it was an ounce, others said no."

Finally, the hunts were over. [15]

The Memoirs make a brief reference, in June 1577, to an "unknown beast" that devoured a child in Brie. "Unknown beasts" were reported in 1579. They "torment people in the fields and on the roads," says Claude Hatton. One of them ate a child. The plowmen had to arm themselves with sticks. This "beast" frequented the forests.

> "It has been suggested that it was some leopard or werewolf and that this beast was a Waldensian man (sorcerer) who, through the devil's art, transformed himself into this figure." [16]

Like the Beast of Vergy in 1545, the popular identity of the Provinois predator oscillates between the transformed man and the foreign feline, the supernatural and the exotic. And the leopard itself can be one of the werewolf's disguises. According to a 1574 occasional, recounting the misdeeds of a werewolf hermit, Gilles Gamier, the latter obtained from the Demon the means to become, whenever he wished,

> "a wolf, a lion, or a leopard, as he chose." And because the wolf is a more worldly

beast than other animal species, it preferred to be disguised as one."

The choices of metamorphoses offered to a minion of the devil in the second half of the 16th century illustrate the integration of exotic felines into popular demonology. An example from the previous century demonstrates the diabolical nature of the leopard within the framework of feudal society.
During the trial of Gilles de Rais, the child murderer, in 1440, a witness testified that he had heard by hearsay that, during a demonic evocation in the Pouzauges woods, the magician had seen "a demon that had the appearance of a leopard" pass near him.

Events from the 16th century and contemporary events deserve to be compared. The predators of Cézallier and Valais, mistaken for felines exotic animals, were in fact wolves. The Beast of Vergy, in 1547, was one too. The various wild animals of Burgundy and Provins, referred to as "onces" or "leopards" by the sources, could hardly have been lynxes. Indeed, while a few rare cases of aggression against humans are known, there are no examples of cannibalistic lynxes (Lavauden 1930). Lurking beneath the mask of exotic felines of the 16th century were most likely wolves, perhaps with unusual characteristics. In these early cases, as in contemporary reports, the intensity of the attacks and their unusual nature led rural residents to seek extraordinary solutions. According to Marconville, the ravages of 1547-1548 extended over a vast region (Berry, Auxerrois, Orléanais), producing a crisis that already foreshadowed those of Gévaudan and Cézallier.

The novels of chivalry.

So far, we have focused on studying an ancient event and its legendary repercussions. It is also possible to start from the fictional by detaching certain literary situations that may have facilitated the transition from fact to legend. We must first mention the anecdote of the Lion by Pepin the Short.

According to Notker, a monk of Saint Gall, in the 9th century, Charlemagne's father, wanting to impress the Franks, severed a lion's head with a single sword blow. According to another source, the feline escaped and Pepin put an end to this escapade. In the 14th century, the Liège compiler Jean d'Outremeuse brought this fight to the Bavarian Forest. The ferocious animal came from Tharse, "but it had been so poorly guarded that it escaped," says Jean d'Outremeuse.

> The great wild lion lived in this wood... and no one dared to pass through it, because it devoured people so cruelly.

Pepin the Short freed the region. [19]
From the 9th to the 14th century, the episode became more detailed and localized. From a simple fight, we moved to a brief escape, then to the temporary settlement of an exotic wild animal in a European forest, where it becomes the scourge. The popularity of this story is attested by a 13th-century sculpture on the portal of Notre-Dame de Paris. King

Pepin triumphs, standing over the slain lion. According to Gaston Paris, the sculptor was inspired by oral tradition. [20]

This example is important in several respects. As early as the 14th century, there was a prestigious literary model for the hunt for the escaped feline. Moreover, the possible circulation of this theme from literary to oral culture suggests the existence of a popular tradition. The sculpture of Notre-Dame de Paris may also have encouraged the emergence of an etiological legend. Finally, the geographical location of the story roots it in a region, providing the conditions for the germination of a local tradition. Ferrières-en-Gâtinais is also named as one of the sites of the battle.

Since this theme is only a specific case of a broader issue—that of the intercommunication between elite and popular culture—it is only possible here to offer a few suggestions. Certain elements of the Arthurian cycle could also have contributed to the construction of the theme of the exotic feline and its insertion into the European context.

The feline appears as the adversary of a valiant warrior in the Merveilles de Rigomer, a novel composed in the 13th century by a troubadour from Tournai. In it, the knight Gawain fights against the "panther of Maie Gaudine." [21]
But it is the master of the Round Table, King Arthur, that we must focus on to discover the most striking example.

The Black Book of Carmathen, a Welsh treatise, transcribed in the 13th century but containing much older texts, speaks of a terrible man-eating feline, the "chapalu." The Livre d'Artus, a 14th-century novel, presents this "cat" as a creature lurking in a "great cavern" beyond Lake Lausanne (Geneva). King Arthur succeeded in defeating it. As early as the 16th century, the battle between the monarch and the giant cat was more specifically located on Mont du Chat, a mountain overlooking Lake Bourget in Savoy. This name, recorded since 1232, attests to the legend's persistence (Freymond 1899). The Franciscan Jacques Fodéré recounted the fight against the Cat in a work published in 1619. He noted, regarding the "furious beast" of Mont du Chat, that the common people called it a wild cat, but it was of an excessive size that resembled a tiger. This monster prevented travelers from crossing the mountain. It was slain by two of Arthur's knights. [22]

At the end of the 19th century, the Romance scholar E. Freymond inquired with local scholars about the possible survival of a popular tradition about this battle around Lake Bourget. Father P. Jullien confirmed the existence of a legend among the old Savoyards. The cat was referred to as the "beast" that "devoured one-twentieth of all those who passed over the mountain." A "knight" or a "soldier," depending on the versions collected, purged the region of it (Freymond 1899).

Even better than the episode of Pepin the Short's Lion, the legend of Arthur's Cat illustrates the popularization of chivalric tales and their inclusion in toponymy. The

location of a "big cat" in the Savoy mountains is all the more relevant given that the lynx was—and perhaps still is—an inhabitant of the region. In 1982, a young specimen of this animal was killed by a train in Haute-Savoie.

Like Pepin the Short's battle, Arthur's has left traces in medieval art. Indeed, in the famous mosaic of Otranto Cathedral, dating from the 12th century, King Arthur is depicted fighting a feline, perhaps a panther. [23]

The integration of feline combat into religious art gives this theme the value of an exemplar. When exotic felines appeared in popular bestiary in the 16th century, they had already left a deep imprint on the noble bestiary and Christian symbolism.

CONCLUSION

While we have been able to highlight certain similarities between stories of felines past and present, we must nevertheless make an essential distinction. It relates to the nature of the victims.

Yesterday, humans were supposed to satisfy the appetites of "ounces" and "leopards." Today, the prey are solely animals. Yesterday, the community was directly attacked, and it generated much more radical imaginary representations.

Man transformed into a wolf, the secret cannibal waiting for the right moment to put on his predatory beast skin again—all this bloody imagery derives from a historical reality: that of the ravages of wolves. From this, a very rich folklore of the exceptional wolf has been built. This "surwolf" has been integrated into the popular bestiary as a magical wolf, or as a Beast of formidable indeterminacy. Traditional signs made it possible to distinguish the supernatural wolf from the common wolf (Meurger 1989). In the 16th century, when rural dwellers could not identify a predator, the feline was sometimes presented as an alternative to the magical wolf. The imaginary matrix of the "lynx," thanks to its fluidity, favored interpretive flows from the wolf to the lynx and from the lynx to the exotic feline. The latter, integrated into the noble bestiary, had already found a place in a toponymy in medieval times. All these elements allow us to put forward a research hypothesis. When, in contemporary times, a witness chooses a specific feline to designate what they saw, it can be suggested that this recognition could in certain cases depend on a predominance of certain animals in the popular bestiary. The occasional lioness perhaps refers to a lioness of memories. Certain established models such as the lion, the panther (and, beyond felines, the hyena and the bear), already at work in previous cases, would reappear in events, on the occasion of carnages deemed extraordinary. Whatever the legendary felines' ties to the world of the supernatural, their inclusion in 16th-century stories takes on the value of an alternative hypothesis. Marconville's text testifies to this ideological shift. What, indeed, are the "two great and very cruel beasts"? A scourge of God or an example of the dangers of exoticism? The Beast of Gévaudan would similarly divide opinion.

Divine punishment, the Bishop of Mende will affirm. "A panther escaped from the hands of its driver," the strong-minded will counter.

In contemporary times, the legend of exotic felines appears to have two main functions. First, it constitutes a parable about desertification (Meurger 1984). "There are no more paths in the woods," say the Morvan people. The "pumas of the Rockies" are therefore no longer at risk of being disturbed, and through these fir forests, it is man who now appears as a rare species (Morvan 1983).

Similarly, during the Beast of Noth affair, the "lioness" was supposed to have taken up residence in Auzillac, a dying village. The ease with which an exotic wild cat was able to find a home in barns and attics implicitly denounces the neglect of rural habitats. Dusk is no longer just the "hour between dog and wolf." It is the moment when the felines of legend and those of reality set out for their night patrol. It is "sitting in the twilight, at the foot of a crucifix" that one of the Bugey lynxes awaits a breeder.

Admittedly, this unusual boldness is a zoological fact. But it is also a traditional characteristic of the Beasts of folklore. The Beast of Gévaudan was said to peer through windows (Meurger 1989).

Some Bugey sheep farmers interpret this familiarity of lynxes as proof of their "domestic" origins. These would be "cabin lynxes," animals "bottle-raised" and released by environmentalists. 25 But aren't "cabin lynxes" the condemnation, again and again, of the pact of some of our fellow creatures with the ferocious beast? The theme of exotic felines well illustrates the dynamics of legend. Rather than directly opposing reality, it penetrates and exploits it. Wolves and lynxes have thus served as a basis for the fiction of lions and leopards. In the same way, large fish and bizarre joists have allowed the tradition of lake monsters to gain an illusory factuality (Meurger 1988). This process of naturalizing myth has been unintentionally facilitated by certain naturalists. Indeed, these natural science experts, starting from the postulate of a factual core in every legend, actually cemented illusory factualities. Thanks to them, legend was able to become legitimate conjecture. Zoologists saw the traditional Loch Ness Monster as a living fossil. Based on the same presuppositions, the English naturalist Di Francis proposes interpreting stories of mysterious felines as evidence of the existence of another "living fossil," a large cat unknown in the British Isles.

To these excesses of empiricism, we can oppose an approach that restores the cultural construction of Nature.

Michel Meurger.

NOTES

1. Paul Sébillot's monumental work, Le Folklore de France (Paris: Guilmoto, 4 vols., 1904-1907), offers very little information on feline folklore. Note, however, in volume 4,

the mention of a lordly ghost who, among other animal metamorphoses, transforms into a lion, the "noble" beast par excellence.

2. L'Est républicain, May 15, 1977.

3. Le Nouvel Observateur, April 25, 1977, p. 71.

4. Communication by J.-J. Barloy.

5. Nice-Matin, February 17, 1983.

6. Le Figaro, December 30, 1988.

7. Thus, the Beast of Exmoor, in Devon, described by witnesses sometimes as a feline, sometimes as an unidentified canine. See R. J. M. Rickard, "The Exmoor Beast and Others," Fortean Times, No. 40, Spring 1983, pp. 52-61.

8. Nord-Matin, July 27, 1982.

9. Libération, September 10, 1982.

10. Philippe Camerarius, Les Méditations historiques, trans. Simon Goulart, Lyon, Harsy, 1610, book 11, chap. 2, p. 111. The legendary panther also has very ancient antecedents in the Centre region. Thus, the Panther of the March, which is said to have devoured a hundred men around 1698 (Meurger 1984).

11. J. Camus, "Cheetah Hunters in France in the 15th and 16th Centuries," Feuille des Jeunes Naturalistes, August 1, 1888, pp. 129-131.

12. L. Charbonneau-Lassay, Le Bestiaire du Christ, Desclée de Brouwer, 1940, p. 293.

13. See the episode of the Turkish bassa who, "thirsty for Christian blood," wants to deliver a Hungarian prisoner to a lion, in P. Camerarius, op. cit., p. 365.

Norwegian legends present the Turks as cannibals: V. A. H. Sljelbred; "The Turks in Norway, Narratives and Function," 9th Congress of the International

Society for Folk Narrative Research, Budapest, June 10-17, 1989.

14. Ch. Marcel-Robillard, Le Folklore de la Beauce, vol. VIII, Le Folklore de la Peur, II,

Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose, 1972, p. 13.

15. Mémoires de Claude Hatton, Paris: Bourquelot, 1857, vol. II, p. 907.

16. Ibid., and original ms. by C. Hatton, BN, ms. 11575, P 864 A.

17. "Memorable Arrest of the Court of the Parliament of Dôle... against Cilles Garnier",

Sens,

J. Savine, 1574, f. 9.

18. The Trial of Gilles de Rais, documents presented by C. Bataille, Paris, J.-J. Pauvert,

1965, p. 307.

19. Gaston Paris, Mélanges de littérature française du Moyen Age, Paris, Champion

1910, Part T, pp. 183-215.

20. Ibid., p. 189.

21. A. Micha, “Miscellaneous French Romances in Verse,” in R.S. Loomis, Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959), p. 386.

22. J. Fodéré, Historical and Topographical Narration of the Convents of the Order of Saint Francis (Lyon: Rigaud, 1619), pp. 926-927.

23. R.S. Loomis, “Arthurian Legends,” Medieval Art, vol. 1 (London: 1938), p. 36.

24. Abbé Pourcher, History of the Beast of Gévaudan, the True Scourge of God (Saint-Martin-de-Boubaux: the author, 1889), p. 95.

25. J.-L. Marzorati, "Lynx Attack," VSD, August 3-9, 1989, pp. 44-47.

26. Di Francis, Cat Country: The Quest for the British Big Cat, London: David and Charles, 1983.

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